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# MOSES' MOTHER IN EXODUS 2:1-10 AND MOTHERS IN PERSONAL NAMES AMONG THE IGBO PEOPLE, SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA

## ABSTRACT

In cultures such as Ancient Israel and the Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria, the qualities of women and the essential roles they play in society are elucidated in various ways. The Hebrew Bible conveys these in narratives, while the Igbo people do so in female personal names. This article presents the role Moses' mother played in saving him (Ex. 2:1-10) and similar actions of mothers in Igboland, as encoded in female personal names. Narrative analysis is employed in the study of the biblical text. The explanatory analysis of Igbo personal names uses data collected from families who give and bear such names. This article aims to uplift the excellent roles of women and demonstrates that patriarchy does not obliterate those contributions in society.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The perception of the excellent roles of women in patriarchal cultures, where women are generally subjugated and considered lower-class citizens when compared with their male counterpart, is instructive. In such cultures, women operate in the background and their activities powerfully propagate the good course of society, despite the untold ill treatments they endure. Women fulfil their vocation by making indispensable contributions to humankind.

This paper singles out two cultures, Ancient Israel as presented in the Hebrew Bible and the Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria, to investigate the fundamental roles of women, particularly mothers, in human society, notwithstanding the domineering attitude of males in these two cultures. The Hebrew Bible focuses on Moses' mother in the history of Ancient Israel, as narrated in the first ten verses of chapter two of the Book of Exodus. Her undaunted action saved her son and prepared him for the salvation of the oppressed Israelites in Egypt. She is depicted in this narrative as a tender loving and caring mother who, on account of the maternal love for her infant, was not in any way afraid to defy the injunctions of the Pharaoh. Personal names, given mainly to females among the Igbo people reverberate what this brave, loving, Jewish mother dared to do for her family and her nation in distress. This point of convergence of the two cultures thus justifies the choice of the title of this research and the rationale behind it.

Narrative analysis of the chosen pericope (Ex. 2:1-10) that records the events of Moses' early stage of life, in which his mother demonstrated a quality that is natural to women, is considered an appropriate method. On the other hand, a survey of female personal names among the Igbo people was carried out through structured interviews. The process of this survey is explained below. The research is sponsored by the Religious Institute of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of Christ, founded in 1937 by an Irish missionary, Charles Heerey, in Igboland, South-eastern Nigeria. He was moved by compassion for the women suffering greatly from maltreatment and neglect in the guise of culture and tradition. The foundation of the indigenous religious institute of women from the same Igbo culture enhanced his missionary zeal and helped him improve the condition of women in Igbo society.

The paper aims to contribute to the endeavours of this religious institute, which has, for over eighty years, tenaciously worked to improve the life of women in various nations of the world, particularly in Igboland, where there is a very high concentration of its members and activities. The research elucidates the indispensable roles of mothers in the Hebrew Bible and among the Igbo people, which are often blurred by the domineering attitude of men. The article begins with the study of Exodus 2:1-10 and a survey of female personal names among the Igbo people. This is followed by a synthesis of these two. If the research helps women appreciate their naturally endowed qualities, it has achieved its desired goal.

## 2. MOSES' MOTHER IN EXODUS 2:1-10

The prowess of Moses' mother is best comprehended when her story is read in its context, namely the oppression of Israelites narrated in the first chapter of Exodus.

In fact, Exodus 1:1-2:10 is considered a literary unit (Weimar 1996:180-181), narrating how Israelites were oppressed in Egypt. In the first chapter, the cruelty of the king of Egypt and his people was heartlessly extended to innocent infants. Such tyrannical attitude is comparable to the primordial chaos preceding God's creative activities and the state of confusion in which the Egyptians were engulfed during the punitive ten plagues (Gosse 2006:357-364). Pharaoh instructed two Hebrew midwives in these words:

When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live (Ex. 1:16).

This measure was adopted to reduce the population of Israelites, who the Egyptians thought were a threat to their nation. Their fear of the number of Israelites is articulated thus:

Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land (Ex. 1:10).

The midwives who were instructed to terminate the lives of infants were not heartless like the king who issued the order. They spared their lives and God blessed them for their compassion, because the principal function of midwives is to save lives.

Although the midwives were compassionate towards Israelite women and their newborn, Israelite mothers were still afraid of losing their children. It was necessary to take other means to preserve their lives. Moses' mother demonstrated this in a heroic manner (Ex. 2:1-10). A translation of this from the original Hebrew language to English in *The New Revised Version* is as follows:

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.<sup>2</sup> The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months.<sup>3</sup> When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.<sup>4</sup> His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.<sup>5</sup> The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it.<sup>6</sup> When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children', she said.<sup>7</sup> Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?'<sup>8</sup> Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes'. So the girl went and called the child's mother.<sup>9</sup> Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it.<sup>10</sup> When the child grew up, she brought him

to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, 'because', she said, 'I drew him out of the water'.

The story of women in the life of Moses began with his mother who was highly solicitous about her son. Her effort was rewarded, for the Egyptian princess also proved her feminine quality of compassion when she saw the child floating on water. Moses' sister, identified later as Miriam, standing near the river and giving instructions as to what to do, dutifully carried out the entrusted mission. In this and other narratives on the later leadership activities of Moses, Miriam was highly active in the life of the nascent nation of Israel (Reis 2010:183). With the sole intention to save her brother, she was very audacious, empathic, and persuasive in her interaction with Pharaoh's daughter (Branch 2006:257). The maid of Pharaoh's daughter also understood and did not reveal the secret that could have led to the death of the child. Moses was, in fact, surrounded by the loving care of women in this scene. Later in his life, when he had to flee to Midian from the growing wrath of the Pharaoh because of his zeal for his compatriots, seven daughters of the priest of Midian took him to their home. Their father Reuel warmly received him and gave him his daughter Zipporah in marriage (Ex. 2:11-25). It is significant to note that the number seven in the Biblical world is sacred and connotes perfection and completeness (Friberg 1992:1145). Nothing could be more perfect and complete at this time than the care of seven women for one man, culminating in the marriage of one of them. In a strange situation, which exegetes have not yet convincingly addressed, it is said that the Lord met Moses and tried to kill him (Ex. 4:24), but Moses' wife, Zipporah, saved his life (Ex. 4:25). Evidences of efficacious roles of women in the life of Moses do not agree with the view that the narratives on the birth of Moses "set the scene for the exclusion of women from any meaningful action in the story" (Fuchs 2000:307).

The above text taken from Exodus 2:1-10 has a *dénouement* (Ska 2000:35) centered on how Moses was saved, as initiated by his mother. The ending of the story is carefully embedded in its various segments. It has a well-calculated introduction (vv. 1-2) that provides a brief background to the story. Moses' parents, Amram and Jochebed (Ex. 6:20), whose names are not mentioned in the text, were both from the tribe of Levi. The story begins like many newborn stories in the Hebrew Bible (Fischer 1996:162), but the introduction of the child's sister gives a different opinion. The initial Hebrew conjunction (*w<sup>e</sup>*) links Exodus 2:1-10 to the information given in Exodus 1:8-22 on the Egyptians' attempt to control the population of the Israelites sojourning in their midst. This explains why the mother had to conceal her child for three months. It was her first attempt at saving Moses' life. When it was obvious to her that she could no longer hide him, she devised another means.

Did she know that Pharaoh's daughter used to pass beside the river for her daily bathing? The narrator was silent about this. We are not told why the mother of Moses had to take the next step, her second attempt to save her infant (vv. 3-4). This is the second segment of the story. The mother prepared a good water-resistant basket that could not sink; she actually placed Moses among the reeds on the bank of the river. She did not abandon him and return home, but she did something to ensure his safety; she placed his sister at a distance to keep watch over the child. The intuitive acumen of mothers is their natural endowment given to them by the Creator for a purpose. Moses' mother displayed her own. It must have occurred to her that, when a fellow woman sees a helpless child, she would be moved to pity, as Pharaoh's daughter did. This led to the third effective attempt to save the child.

In verses 5-10, Moses was at the mercy of Pharaoh's compassionate daughter, who heard his cry. "Actually, her compassion is decisive for the survival of the future Moses" (Ska 2000:78). The situation in Egypt, in the setting of the story, helped her recognise the child as belonging to an Israelite. It was only the child's race at this time that could leave a child in such a situation; thus, the princess exclaimed: "This must be one of the Hebrews' children" (v. 6). In the original Hebrew text, this is cast in a verbless clause of classification (*miyyaldê hā'ibrīm zeh*) to emphasise the provenance of the child (Waltke & O'Connor 1990:132).

However, the child was not alone, for his sister was vigilant at a distance. Her role was one of the most delightful features in the narrative (Childs 1976:18). On the contrary, the introduction of Miriam, Moses' sister (v. 4), sounds like an afterthought. The opening statement to the pericope under review sounds as if Moses is the first and only child of the couple (v. 1). Lerner (1986) notes that biblical narratives such as this one are used to perpetuate male dominance over women. This article admits that, in patriarchal cultures, women and children are not counted. It is not unusual for the biblical writers to omit a woman in a narrative, until the narrative could no longer flow without a recognition of a woman's role. A broader discussion of patriarchy in the African context, in relation to the Moses' narrative in Exodus, affirms that a female child hardly counts. In Africa, a man may have as many female kids as possible and still state that he has "no child" (Ndjerareou 2006:87-88). Usually, after the birth of the first son, the man is recognised as having a "child". Hence, the need to emphasise the role of Miriam in saving the child Moses.

The discovery of the child (vv. 5-6) led to another attempt to save the child. Pharaoh's daughter did not take the child to the palace; she easily yielded to the suggestion of the child's sister, leading to another segment in the story. In fact, in saving the life of Moses, the delicate, intelligent feminine hearts of women greatly intervened (Auzou 1997:117).

The next step (vv. 7-9) to save the child was by giving him to his own mother to nurse. Pharaoh's daughter instructed the mother to nurse the child for her. This meant that the child returned to the mother for some years. Her effort was rewarded. The princess promised to pay her, without mentioning what the price would be. In the Hebrew version, the narrator constructed a sentence with an adverbial genitive suffix (*'ānī 'ettēn 'et-šēkārēk*), which represents a mediated object (Waltke & O'Connor 1990:303). The most important reward was that she got her child back and that she looked after him, not in fear as initially, but openly as she was then working for the Egyptian princess. Moses' mother planned all this and perfectly realised her aim. She saved her child for he grew up with her in her family. An Israelite became an Egyptian; Pharaoh's daughter named the child Moses because of the circumstances surrounding the child's birth. The princess explained the name as follows: "because I drew him out of the water" (v. 10). She took the child as her son. In other words, Moses lived for some years in the Egyptian palace. His dual citizenship was of immense help to him when God called him to be an agent for the salvation of Israelites from Egypt. He had two mothers, his own and Pharaoh's daughter; he knew about the suffering of his people, for his early life was spent in his own family. On the other hand, he knew what the oppressors were planning for his people, as he lived in their midst.

Both mothers saved Moses' life and, not knowing what he would be in the future, they prepared for the salvation of the whole nation. In other words, they saved not only Moses, but also the oppressed Israelites in Egypt, because this little child was destined to be God's instrument in liberating his people. The initiative to save the child was that of Moses' biological mother with the help of another woman who adopted him as her son. Why is nothing said about the father of the child? He was barely introduced and identified as a man from the tribe of Levi. Why was he not mentioned again in the circumstances surrounding the saving of his own child? The narrator of the story focused only on the mother and the other women who were active in the scene. The names of the women are not mentioned, perhaps "to good rhetorical effect" (Meyers 2005:42). The concentric structure of the narrative in Exodus 2:1-10 also accentuates the role of women (Smith 2010:21).

Instances of irony that pervade the entire story are obvious in the narrative on the birth of Moses and the successful attempts to save him. Moses' mother had the courage to place her baby boy beside the Nile, in which the Pharaoh had ordered his people to drown Israelites' male infants. "The medium of death thus becomes for Moses the medium of life" (Durham 1987:16). From the Egyptians' perspective, Moses' sister, a slave girl, was able to convince the Egyptian princess; the girl called the baby's mother to nurse her own son and was rewarded for this service. The princess was oblivious of the girl's plan

(Kizhakkeyil 2009:223). The Pharaoh's daughter adopted and preserved the life of the potential enemy doomed to death. Moses grew up in the Egyptian palace, knowing their plans against his own people; in this way, he was able to save them when God called him to be an instrument for their salvation. A similar irony is found in the preceding story in Exodus 1. The Egyptian midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, thwarted Pharaoh's devious intent to exterminate the lives of Israelites' male infants at birth. When they told the king that the Israelite women did not need midwives, because they were very strong and delivered their babies before midwives arrived, Pharaoh believed their reason for violating his injunction. An irony often elucidates the folly in an action; this was true of Pharaoh's plan for population control in this narrative.

Like some Hebrew Bible stories that have parallels in Ancient Near East texts, the narrative of Moses' birth has a parallel story in the Legend of Sargon of Agade, as recorded in two Neo-Assyrian copies and in a Neo-Babylonian text (Pritchard 1969:119). Just like the mother of Moses, Sargon's mother conceived him in secret and when he was in danger, she prepared a basket of rushes with bitumen and placed him near a river. He was rescued by a man called Akki, a water-drawer, who reared him like a son. "The theme of the child preserved against the odds and raised secretly belongs to the folklore of all times" (Ska 2006:209). It is also a sign of divinely guided origins of a great leader (Clifford 1992: 46). Although there are differences in the two stories, the parallels are fairly instructive, particularly the emphasis on the loving care of mothers who do all they can to save the lives of their children.

Similar actions of Moses' mother are not uncommon in the Hebrew Bible. The vast majority of mothers in the Hebrew Bible helped realise God's design for his people. Sarah, Abraham's wife, understood that her only son Isaac was the genuine heir and that he was the one through whom Israel's lineage would continue. She thus ordered Abraham, even though this appeared to be an insult and wickedness against Hagar, her slave:

Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac (Gen. 21:10).

Abraham obeyed her, encouraged by a divine directive that confirmed Sarah's words:

[W]hatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you (Gen. 21:12).

This narrative clearly shows that Sarah understood God's plan for his people more than Abraham and was firm in her decision (Obiorah 2017:32). Hagar proved herself a good mother when she did not abandon her son Ishmael at a

critical moment in her life; she stayed with him in the wilderness until God heard her cry (Gen. 21:15-19). In a story that appears to be a deceit perpetrated by a partial mother, Rebecca the wife of Isaac and the mother of Esau and Jacob was able to perceive the divine plan for Israel and saved the situation. The blessing prepared for Esau was actually for Jacob and the mother was instrumental in this change of destiny. God's plan for his people was fulfilled through the attentiveness of the mother (Gen. 27). In another story, Solomon's mother, Bathsheba, was behind her son's accession to the throne (1 Kgs. 1:28-53). She used her femininity to win David to her side and her son Solomon became a monarch in Israel; this was also God's plan for his people.

Biblical mothers did whatever they felt necessary to promote their sons, the end apparently justifying the means in their eyes (Vamosh 2007:44).

In all these instances, mothers were able to discern God's design for the people and their astuteness and prudence moved history forward. God's providential action was through the perceptiveness and resourcefulness of these women (Schuller 1989:180). What they did for their children goes beyond their immediate families, for many benefitted from it. Were their children or other members of their family from the Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria and had to give names to their daughters, they would give them significant names that are "mother-phoric", depicting the roles played by these mothers in society.

### 3. MOTHERS IN PERSONAL NAMES AMONG THE IGBO PEOPLE OF SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA

Personal names among the Igbo people are succinct anecdotes portraying the circumstances surrounding the birth of a child or the life situation of the parents or the family. Generally, personal names are given to a baby by the head of the household, the father of the child. In some instances where the child's grandfather still lives, he can name the child in consultation with his son and the mother of the child. "Mother-phoric" names are given for various reasons, which invariably revolve around the selfless benevolence of either the paternal or the maternal grandmother. Mothers make untold sacrifices for their children and wise children do not fail to appreciate their mothers in varied ways. They immortalise their mothers' help by giving their daughters descriptive names depicting the image of the mothers.

A significant aspect of these names mainly concerns feminine personal names. Many baby girls are named after the role played by a mother in their immediate or extended family; the mother could be the baby's paternal or maternal grandmother. Worthy of note is that names are given by the newborn's

father or grandfather. This observation is highly instructive, because males give these names to their daughters or granddaughters in a society where women are not considered to be of equal status as men.

The methodology employed in this research is a simple explanatory qualitative method. Its purpose is to identify and affirm meanings and relationships in mother-phoric personal names among the Igbo people. Sampling was convenient and purposive. A survey of girls' personal names was conducted in the twenty-one Local Government Areas of Anambra State in Igboland, South-eastern Nigeria, among 187 families where persons bear names related to mother. The word "mother" in the Igbo language is *nne*, which remains basically the same in all the many and varied dialects of this language. This study includes only persons with personal names with *nne*. Of the 187 families involved in the study, 305 persons, including the name-bearers, their mothers, some grandfathers, fathers and grandmothers whose actions generated the names, responded to the questionnaire. They had to provide answers to the following: the meaning of the name; whether the bearers appreciate their names; the person who gave the name; the reason why the name was given, and the impact of the name in the family. The response rate exceeded the researchers' target. Data collected were manually coded and themes emerged organically. The outcome is presented below.

A catalogue of "mother-phoric" names is lengthy. Here are some of them and their literal meanings which are related to one another, although a more detailed study and analysis can indicate the differences in their various nuances: *Nnedimma* – Mother-is-Good/Gracious; *Nneamaka* – Mother-is-Good/Beautiful; *Nnediogo* – Mother-is-Gracious/Splendid; *Ezinne* – Good Mother; *Nnediebube* – Mother-is-Glorious/Awesome; *Nneoma* – Good Mother; *Nnenna* – Father's Mother; *Nnenne* – Mother's Mother; *Nneka* – Mother-is-Great; *Ezenne* – Queen-Mother/Mother-of-all-Mothers/Mother-par-excellence; *Nnebundo* – Mother-is-Shade/Security; *Nnebugwu* – Mother-is-Prestige; *Nnediuto* – Mother-is-Sweet; *Nnebuisi* – Mother-is-the-Beginning/Important; *Nnebuonu* – Mother-is-Joy; *Nnebuife* – Mother-is-Light; *Nnekasi* – Mother-is-the-Greatest; *Nnebuike* – Mother-is-Strength; *Nneasoka* – Mother-is-very-Sweet; *Nnediegwu* – Mother-is-Awesome; *Nneadika* – Mother-is-very Good; *Nneebuka* – Mother-is-Great; *Arunne* – Mother's-Body/Touch; *Akunne* – Mother's-Wealth.

The majority of these names are sentences construed with the copulative verb "to be", producing an existential predicate from the word for mother (*nne*) in the language and an adjective that best describes, for the name-giver, the mental image of mother derived from one's personal experiences. The names are not all metaphors or similes for which one has to seek the intended meaning beyond the personal names. The names are not proverbs that can

easily elude the less informed in society or persons who are not conversant with the language. There are, however, some important metaphors in these names. The name *Nnebyndo* – Mother is Shade/Security – invites one to reflect on the meaning of a shade that has protective features. A person who gives such a name has in mind the image of a mother who protects and who did protect in one's personal life. Moreover, these sentences are all in the present tense which makes them vivid and real, even though the action that gave rise to the names occurred in the past. The present tense also means a statement of fact and of universal truth. In other words, these names are what mothers generally are, and should always be. The names are also exclamations by those who were beneficiaries of their mother's goodwill, generosity and sacrifices, like Moses' mother.

Some of the names that do not have a copulative, such as *Akynne* – Mother's-Wealth, have a dual meaning: the wealth of the mother sustained the person/s who gave the name to their daughter; the daughter is expected to be a source of wealth for the grandmother whose diligence sustained the family at the birth of the girl-child. This second connotation, however, does not suggest that a mother's generosity is conditional, has strings attached to it, or has an ulterior motive. The vast majority of mothers are generous in their actions, which they view as natural to them as mothers. It is observed that a nuclear family gives a mother-phoric name only to one person in a generation. The respondents explained this to be a sign of the uniqueness of the mother who is portrayed in the name. She does not have a replicate; it, therefore, suffices for only one person to echo her action in history.

With the exception of two instances among all those who responded to the interview, all the mother-phoric names are feminine personal names. In the two exceptions, the mother-phoric name *Ezinne* – Good-Mother is a family name in two different families. One of the two has lived up to a fourth generation. This is awe-inspiring, because the good work of the matriarch who engendered the name is repeatedly told to subsequent generations. The family has grown so large and none of its members intend to change this last name. It has become the pride of the family when members recall the story of the matriarch whose action made the family what it has been for generations.

The positive responses are unanimous on the issue of the appreciation of these personal names by their bearers. Some went further, adding that, even if they were to be given an opportunity to change their names, they would still retain their present one. Most of them would prefer to be called the name in full, instead of the abbreviated or endearment forms many employ in other names. It is observed that their unalloyed appreciation of the names is attributed to their acute understanding of their meanings and knowledge of the circumstances that generated the names. Their appreciation is wholly directed

to their grandmothers and, in a few instances, to their great-grandmothers, whose loving and selfless sacrifices gave rise to these names.

One of the respondents, a physician, narrated how his mother sold all her jewelry and clothes in order to support his studies when he ran short of funds to continue his academic work. He named his first daughter *Nneka* – “Mother-is-Great”. Another recounted with tears how his mother risked her life for him when they were being persecuted by their kinsfolk and expelled from their home, after the death of his own father. He calls her daughter *Nnekasị* – Mother-is-the-Greatest. A young wealthy man narrated how his mother worked hard to take care of him and his seven siblings and made sure that they all became college graduates with professional training. His own daughter is called *Nnebuife* – Mother-is-Light. Many mothers have saved their children through good advice and understanding. These endear them to their children. Encrypted in these names are stories of their mothers’ contributions to the family, and often, more specifically, to the persons who first suggested the names.

The respondents proffered numerous reasons for giving their daughters these names. These reasons can be summarized as follows and refer to the actions and qualities of their mothers: mothers who were outstanding for their endurance for the sake of their families; mothers in polygamous families, whose husbands neglected to take care of them and their children and preferred other wives; mothers who single-handedly raised their children; mothers who sacrificed comfort in order to give their children very high and quality education; mothers whose sagacity paved the way for their sons to occupy very high positions in society; young widowed mothers who had the opportunity to remarry, but raised their children singly; widowed mothers who bore insults and calumnies in their endeavours to raise their children; exceptionally industrious mothers who were the pride of their families; mothers of outstanding moral character and piety; mothers who excelled in honest leadership in society, and mothers who loved their families to the point of dying for them. The children of these brave mothers remember them in the names they give their daughters.

These personal names have a great impact on the families and extended families of the bearers. The grandmothers, who are the initiators of the names through their contributions to the family advancement, feel so loved and valued, knowing that their granddaughters convey their life stories in their personal names. When they are maternal grandmothers, the names strengthen the already existing bond between the family of the child’s maternal home and her own family. Mutual respect thrives in such families. For the bearer of the name, who knows the story behind her name, it is an impetus to be a good mother to her own children when the time comes. She is naturally attracted to her grandmother, for her name is a tribute to the goodness of her grandmother.

The mother of the child also endeavours to perpetuate the good work of her predecessor. A person with a “mother-phoric” name is highly esteemed and respected, because the name shows that there is loving care in that family. If the biblical Moses were to be an Igbo in Igboland, he would have given his daughter, if he had any, a name that portrays what his mother did for him. A fitting one would be *Nnezorọ* – Saved-by-Mother.

#### 4. PARADOX IN CONTEXT

Women in the life of Moses, particularly his mother, and the outstanding role of mothers in the Igbo culture represent only one aspect of the position of women in these two cultures. Paradoxically, women are also presented as forces that overturned known order and introduced chaos. In the Hebrew Bible, they powerfully propelled the history of Ancient Israel, even when their men were projected as leaders of society and divine interlocutors. The name of Abraham's wife, Sarai/Sarah, means a princess in Hebrew and is “indicative of the high standing of Sarah and Abraham as tribal leaders” (Vamosh 2007:12). In fact, Israel's matriarchs were very active in their homes and beyond. The Bible introduced Rahab as a prostitute (Josh. 2:1); but she was instrumental in Israel's success in the exploration of the Promised Land (Josh. 2). Assiduous prayer and perseverance in hardship sustained Hannah, the mother of Samuel; she paved the way for an essential transition to monarchy in Israel, as her son prepared the Israelites for this. The story of Naomi and Ruth in the Book of Ruth depicts an instance where women helped move the history of the people of Israel. Ruth's determination and her mother-in-law Naomi's astuteness made this foreigner an ancestress of King David. Deborah stands out as the only women judge, who participates in saving her people as other judges of her time did (Judg. 4-5). The courage and filial love of Jephthah's daughter enabled his father to fulfil the vow he made to God (Judg. 11). From the point of view of the Philistines, Delilah, who discovered the secret of Samson's strength that subsequently led to his death, was a heroine and highly patriotic (Judg. 16). At a time when the Israelites needed some explanation about a book unearthed in the temple, the prophetess Huldah explained the importance of the book and her clarifications and prophecy led to a crucial reform in their history (2 Kgs. 22:14-20; 2 Chr. 34:22-28). Ardent love for the tradition of Israel enabled a mother of seven sons to encourage and witness the martyrdom of all of them (2 Macc. 7). She exhorted her seventh son in these words: “Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers” (2 Macc. 7:29). An ode in the Book of Proverbs 31:10-30 portrays an ideal woman in the Hebrew Bible. The first line of this poem, cast in an alphabetic acrostic, succinctly summarises its content: “A capable wife who can find?”.

These examples of wise, courageous, selfless and patriotic women in the Hebrew Bible include several instances of degradation, denigration, rejection and deprecation of women. At the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, the depiction of Eve, the primordial mother of humankind who led Adam to disobey the divine injunction, generally projects women in an obscure light, thus leading to the myth of women as the weaker sex. Adam aggravated this when he blamed Eve for his action: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12). His response calls to mind the narrative on the creation of the woman; she was made from a single rib of Adam (Gen. 2:21-22). When this narrative is not read as aetiology of the doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage, the impression is that a woman is merely a man's one rib in her strength. The triplet stories (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:1-11) on the endangerment of Israel's two matriarchs, Sarah and Rebecca, seem to show that their husbands used their wives to save themselves from possible ordeals. In Genesis 38, Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, seduced him by disguising herself as a prostitute. Potiphar's wife attempted to rape Joseph, but the young slave escaped her grip, even though he later suffered the calumny of this woman (Gen. 39). In the narrative on the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19), all those in Lot's nuclear family survived, except his wife, who, in defiance of the Lord's command, looked behind her and became a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26). Lot's two daughters sedated their father and raped him (Gen. 19:30-38). As a rule, in the Hebrew Bible, census excluded women and children (Num. 1). At the time when there was no king in Israel and "all the people did what was right in their own eyes (Judg. 17:6), the mother of Micah helped perpetuate idolatry (Judg. 17). In Elkanah's family (1 Sam. 1), Peninnah was a thorn in the flesh of the childless Hannah; Elkanah showed more empathy than the woman.

The Wisdom Books of the Hebrew Bible intensify these negative presentations of women. The wife of Job was not only insensitive to Job's suffering, but also an embodiment of impiety. She told her husband: "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die" (Job 2:9). Job's response manifests the common opinion of women at that time: "You speak as any foolish woman would speak" (Job 2:10). For the writer of the Book of Proverbs 7, women are adulterers and lurk in hiding to plot the downfall of men. "I found more bitter than death the woman who is a trap, whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters" (Eccles. 7:26). In another instance, the writer disparages women: "One among thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found" (Eccles. 7:28). However, some commentators absolve the writer of this apparent misogyny (Murphy 1992:77). In spite of some wise sayings in favour of women in the Book of Proverbs, one does not fail to notice some anomalies such as "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without good sense" (Prov. 11:22); "The foolish woman is loud; she is ignorant and knows nothing" (Prov. 9:13);

"The mouth of a loose woman is a deep pit; he with whom the LORD is angry falls into it" (Prov. 22:14). Similar negative views of women recur in the Book of Sirach. This is a good example: "From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die" (Sir. 25:24).

A similar paradox in the Hebrew Bible is found in the image of women in the Igbo culture. "Within the domestic sphere, the Igbo woman reigns supreme" (Agbasiere 2000:41). Women are homemakers, organising and carrying out a series of house chores. The children's first teacher is their mother, who teaches them how to speak, walk and behave properly like human beings. In Igboland, the children's good or defective character, compliments or blame, as the case may be, are attributed to the mother, who is their closest companion. Despite the great changes in Igbo contemporary society, and with the effect of globalisation, mothers, who are fully engaged in jobs outside their homes, still arrange for the care of their children and the rest of their household. According to the Igbo notion, a man's appearance and success depend so much on the type of woman he married. A good Igbo woman considers the success of her husband as a family success and endeavours to uphold it. In Igboland, every woman is expected to marry; it is considered a misfortune when a woman who is of marriageable age still lives in her parents' home or alone somewhere. The culture has, to a great extent, accepted celibate chastity of consecrated women in the Catholic Church and other religions. A good number of celibates, particularly Catholic consecrated women, are from Igboland. The culture, highly permeated by Christianity, values their contributions in various fields of the life of people, who wish that these consecrated women live up to their vows and other expectations.

Igbo women are found in all walks of life nowadays. They contribute immensely to the economy of both their families and the nation (Chukwu 2015:38-46). The thrilling songs of various groups of women in rural areas of Igboland enrich the culture (Onyeji 2004:84). Many are well educated and compete favourably with their counterparts in society. They bring their natural endowment, intrinsic to their femininity, to their professions. When this endowment is used properly, the women excel in their places of work. A woman leader often stands out in matters of integrity of character and sense of duty. The people greatly value their contributions in settling disputes, particularly women from the same kindred who marry in different parts of the country; these are traditionally called *umuada* or *umuokpu*, and they are powerful in their decisions. Changes in the contemporary Igbo society have not diminished the authority of these women.

Paradoxical indeed! Men and, more appallingly, fellow women often view these women, who are the heartbeat of their families and society at large, as being of lower status. "The derogation and denigration of womanhood by

men in their use of Igbo proverbs also suggest men as being dominance- and hostility-oriented” (Oha 1998:96). A couple with only female children views this as an ill-fated condition. The number of children in some families is sometimes attributed to their quest for a male child. Even though situations and the mindset of the Igbo people are gradually changing, it is difficult to erase a conception that is endemic in the Igbo culture, as far as female children are concerned. Women are still excluded in some cultural practices such as land inheritance. They can, for instance, buy and prepare kola nuts for visitors or in a social gathering; but the rich and symbolic ceremonies surrounding this essential aspect of the Igbo culture are solely reserved for males, even minors, provided they are not women. Preferences are given to men in matters of inheritance in many parts of Igboland, except for a very limited section where there is matrilineal practice. Generally, the Igbo people have a patrilineal culture, as in the Hebrew Bible. In many parts of Igboland, widows suffer untold injustices, especially if they have no male child. Some of them are deprived of their belongings; others are expelled from their homes, while still others have to undergo some humiliating rituals to appease the spirits of their deceased husbands. Unfortunately, some women spearhead these rituals that inflict undue pain on fellow women. Gender activists in various parts and sectors of Igboland are improving the plight of women. They help them cherish their naturally endowed qualities recognised by many who give or bear *mother-phoric* names.

## 5. CONCLUSION

With the focus on their divinely endowed qualities, women are encouraged to surmount the puzzling attitudes they experience in male-dominated cultures. Those women who find great fulfilment in their lives confidently employ their femininity to the utmost degree and contribute immensely to the holistic growth of the societies in which they find themselves. Concentrating on negative experiences has its own repercussions, often resulting in feelings of inferiority.

This article portrayed the roles of women in two cultures that have a great deal in common: Ancient Israel in the Hebrew Bible and the Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria. The authoritarian traits of men, despite the indispensable roles played by women in their societies, are clearly visible in these cultures. It is paradoxical that women are so valued and extolled, as they inspire the daily life of their families and society at large. They simultaneously suffer degradation and denigration in words and deeds.

Moses’ mother, Jochebed, and other women used their natural qualities and, in so doing, saved him and all the Israelites who were oppressed in Egypt. In the Hebrew Bible, several mothers played similar roles in the lives of their male

children, and their actions benefitted a larger group beyond their immediate families. Some risked their lives in order to save or elevate their children.

Many feminine names in the Igbo culture are construed from the name for mother (*nne*) in the Igbo language and from adjectives depicting the qualities of mothers in their families and beyond. These names are usually given to a girl-child by her father or grandfather, in order to perpetuate the image of his own mother or grandmother. Mother-phoric names in the Igbo culture are succinctly subtle praise of mothers in society. What the Hebrew Bible presents in narratives, the Igbo culture provides in personal names.

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